

THE STRUGGLE OF SOVIET JEWRY

POEMS of PROTEST



by: JOSEPH KERLER-
SOVIET YIDDISH POET

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**WITH HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM
SUGGESTIONS**

POEMS OF PROTEST BY JOSEPH KERLER
(SOVIET YIDDISH POET)

The attention of the world Jewish community and free peoples everywhere has once again been focused on the plight of Soviet Jewry. The Education Department of the Workmen's Circle has prepared several excellent programs on the general background and present situation of Soviet Jewry which are available to you. While the issue is emotion laden and has evoked various action responses, it is difficult for the American Jew to penetrate beyond the abstractions of "oppression and persecution" and confront the issue on a personal level.

Perhaps poetry is the proper medium to penetrate the abstract in order to reach the personal. We, therefore, have prepared this program for you. It includes the poems (in Yiddish, transliteration and English translation) of Joseph Kerler, a contemporary Yiddish poet who, after a long struggle with Soviet authorities, was released on March 26, 1971 and is now living in Israel.

PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS

The first step is to select a program committee of 3-5 people responsible for the presentation. The brief introductions have been divided into two parts:

- 1) General background.
- 2) Background of the poet.

Two people may be selected to read the introductions, or to prepare remarks based upon them. The poems can be presented both in the Yiddish and the translation. Supplementary materials such as the suggested records may be used to enrich the program. At the end of the presentation, the chairman might lead a discussion on the poems and the issues they raise.

The success of the program depends not only on the presentation, but on the preceding publicity in order to attract the audience (sample letter enclosed).

Action suggestions on Soviet Jewry and other uses of these poems are included in the Workmen's Circle kit on Soviet Jewry.

J. Mlotek, Education Director

(Translations are by Elliott Palevsky of the Workmen's Circle Education Department. Please credit when reprinting.)

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON JEWISH CULTURE
IN THE U.S.S.R.

I -

Despite Czarist oppression and pogroms, Russian Jews had developed a rich literature and unique culture. As an oppressed minority living in the autocratic Czarist society, Jews in the second half of the 19th century were attracted to the revolutionary and socialist movements. Dissatisfied with the cosmopolitanism of these organizations, a group of young Jewish Democratic Socialists founded the Jewish Labor Bund (1897) in order to promote Jewish cultural autonomy. In addition to participating in the general revolutionary struggles, it developed a program based on the Yiddish language, culture and Jewish values. As more and more Jews broke away from religious life and traditional patterns of behaviour, they looked to the revolution for the fulfillment of their Jewish and human aspirations. A significant proportion of those participating in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 consisted of such Jews. These struggles were reflected in the Yiddish literature of that period.

The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was followed by a period of bloody civil war after which all opposition was eliminated. Nevertheless, in the first years of Communist rule under Lenin and the first decade of Stalin's rule, Jews had the same right to develop their culture as were granted the other nationalities in the U.S.S.R. The Yiddish press, schools and theatre, literary periodicals and other cultural institutions developed. As the institutions of other nationalities, the Jewish institutions were subservient to the regime and had to follow the party line.

This came to an end during the period of the Stalin terror and purges. In 1937, there began the liquidation of all Yiddish cultural institutions, coupled with the imprisonment of major Yiddish cultural leaders, teachers, artists and writers. From 1936-39, there were successive waves of arrest of prominent Jewish personalities. The second World War put a temporary halt to the cultural destruction of Jewish life. The mass arrests and subsequent murders began once more in 1948.

Professor Solomon Michoels, actor, poet, former chairman of the JEWISH ANTI-FASCIST COMMITTEE received a call in the middle of the night from the NKVD (secret police) ordering him to come to their offices at once. As he left his home, he was run down by an NKVD truck. This seemingly accidental death foreshadowed events to come. The poets Bergelson and Markish were killed in prison. Moishe Kulback and Der Nistor perished in concentration camps. David Hoffstein died in an "insane asylum." The poet Leib Kvitko was shot. A trial of 25 Jewish writers, artists and leaders was held from July 11-18th, 1952. Death sentences were meted out to all but one who received life imprisonment. By 1952, all Jewish cultural institutions and hundreds of Jewish cultural and political leaders (many of them loyal Communists) had been liquidated. Constant protests emanating from various world bodies, socialist and labor federations and from organized Jewish communities throughout the world, were of no avail.

During the 20th Congress of the Communist party in Moscow, when Khrushchev began to vilify Stalin, the liquidation actions were semi-officially acknowledged. The Warsaw Communist Yiddish newspaper (Poland had not yet gone through the process of eliminating Jewish cultural institutions) "Folkshimme," on April 4, 1956 admitted that Soviet authorities liquidated a large number of Jews in literary, cultural and political fields in the years before Stalin's

death in 1953 . . . "Further revelations" appeared in the world press during and after the 20th Party Congress.

During the Khrushchev regime, the physical liquidation of Jewish intellectuals and leaders came to a halt. The few who remained either worked in the one Yiddish monthly "Sovietish Heimland" (25,000 copies) or no longer had any official contact with Jewish life. Yiddish schools, theatres or other institutions which would enable the Soviet Jewish community of nearly three million to transmit its Jewish cultural heritage to new generations, were not re-established. Other national groups, numbering less than 50,000, do have such institutions and are encouraged to use them. When queried about this obvious cultural persecution of Jews, Mikhail Suslov, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, responded: "We have no intention to call back to life a dead culture."

The present Soviet regime asserts that Jews no longer desire to identify with their cultural heritage and have undergone the "natural" process of assimilating into the culture of the regions where they live (primarily Great Russia). The facts, however, belie the assertion. In the Soviet census of 1957, 400,000 people listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. They were not compelled to do so. In fact, due to other forms of discrimination in employment and education, it may well have been to their advantage not to do so. There is an underground Yiddish literature. It consists of writings in Yiddish which are not submitted to "Sovietish Heimland" by authors, young and old, who "will not sell their souls" to publish there. These works are passed around in manuscript from hand to hand. In informal classes in private flats, children learn Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish history. Jewish young people use every occasion of some Jewish significance to gather and express their identity. The holiday, Simhas Torah, has become an event. Tens of thousands of young Jews assemble before the Moscow synagogue and dance and sing Yiddish and Hebrew songs. This totally negates the official assertions about "natural assimilation." The struggle to maintain identity has been described by many writers in many languages, perhaps most poignantly by Elie Wiesel in "THE JEWS OF SILENCE." The struggle of Soviet Jewry for survival as a people is presently carried on on two levels. First, against the persecution which has eliminated the Jewish cultural institutions; second, against the denial of the right to all Soviet citizens to free emigration as prescribed by the United Nations Convention on Human Rights; and the right to be reunited with family in other lands, supported by official Soviet policy. Among those involved in this struggle is the Yiddish poet, Yosef Kerler.

II -

KERLER

The Yiddish poet, Yosef Kerler, presently resides in Moscow. Now, at age 53, he is one of the few people in the Soviet Union who are fully knowledgeable about Yiddish secular culture. He was personally acquainted with the Yiddish actors, writers and intellectuals who were so brutally eliminated. His wife Khayelev and son Berele both speak Yiddish and his home has a Jewish soul. It is filled with books and posters reflecting the suppressed Soviet Yiddish culture. Yiddish songs preserved on old records waft through the air. Friends come there to become steeped in the atmosphere. While recent events have placed him in a position of greater world attention, he has, for the last six years, been waging an open struggle with the Soviet authorities.

He demands that the stranglehold be removed from Yiddish culture allowing Jews to enjoy the rights guaranteed them by the Soviet Constitution. He is also struggling for the right of free emigration. His personal goal is Israel, where he feels he can regain his wholeness as a Jew. "What will become of us? At times my heart feels choked. I long to go home. You cannot imagine how great is my longing." Despite his desire to emigrate to Israel, Kerler sadly notes, that there are some Soviet Jews who, for reasons of identification with Israel, have adopted the slogan "Rak Ivrit" (only Hebrew). He is also against those who wish to make the struggle a purely Jewish one. He feels that it must be part of the common struggle of Soviet liberals and intellectuals to humanize and democratize the country to which they have devoted so much of their lives and energies.

The government controlled writers union and publishing houses have not published his work since 1943. In the early 40's, he was sent to a concentration camp. He has not sought to have his recent writings published in "Sovietish Heimland." Previous to that time, he had won critical acclaim as a poet in the Soviet Union. He has continued to write, but his poems are among those which go through the underground route and are circulated to be read in manuscript. The publication of a number of his protest poems in The Jewish Daily Forward on September 20, 1970 created a literary and political sensation. This was the first time since 1943 that Kerler, the poet, unwittingly reached a mass audience. Because the plight of Soviet Jewry has become a matter of acute world concern, Kerler was suddenly put in the position of spokesman who expressed the pain and the hopes of the oppressed Soviet Jews. The following Sunday, September 27th, additional poems were published in the Forward with a positive-critical evaluation by Joseph Mlotek, Ed Director of the Workmen's Circle. His poem "Fun Farsheydene Yorn" (Of Various Years) had been set to music by the renowned Jewish composer, Sholom Secunda. Other poems appeared in the Yiddish literary magazine "Di Goldene Keyt" which is published in Israel.

We cannot say precisely how these poems found their way to the West. In the #11 1970 issue of "Sovietish Heimland," Kerler was attacked for having his poems published in the Anti-Soviet Forward, thus causing "an anti-Soviet sensation." In a letter which appeared in the Day-Morning Journal, Kerler responds: "It is possible that my poems were printed in the Forward. What conclusion does this lead us to? . . . The truth is that my poems actually circulate from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth. Why need one wonder if at times they also take flight over the seas to other lands? He who opens the cage cannot dictate a flight plan to the liberated dove."

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Poems of the martyred Soviet Yiddish poets can be found in translation in:

- 1) A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry - Howe & Greenberg.
- 2) The Golden Peacock - Joseph Lefwich.

Yiddish songs of protest and from the underground can be found on the following records:

- 1) Songs of the People in the U.S.S.R. (Collectors Guild)-Side I.
- 2) Forbidden Songs (Israeli release) - David Eshet-Side I and II.

We have selected 11 poems and bring them to you in translation as well as in a transliterated Yiddish. The poems fall into four distinct categories:

I - These poems memorialize a number of the murdered Yiddish poets and express the special relationship Kerler feels toward them.

1) At The Monument of Michoels.

2) Ten Years Later.

3) August 12, 1952.

II - These poems give us an insight into the personal struggle of Kerler as poet and as a Jew.

1) Broken Rhythms.

2) From The Far Reaches.

3) May You Never Have To . . .

III - These are poems of pride in the resilience of Yiddish culture and in the Jewish strivings of Soviet Jewish youth.

1) Mother Tongue.

2) Boys and Girls at the Moscow Synagogue.

IV - These are indictments of the Soviet policy towards Jews. They are cries for freedom and calls to us for concern and involvement on the behalf of Soviet Jewry.

1) Let Go.

2) Of Various Years.

3) Reckoning.

AT THE MONUMENT OF MICHOELS

Your proud severed head
suddenly turns grey, it seems to me,
it lifts its bronzed brow
in wonder:
--you have come today
to do me honor yet
you do not let, Yiddish
my mother tongue, near me.

Friends have come here
my own as well as strangers'
and perhaps unfriends
have also come . . .
does my language, at least stand
behind them
shy and still
as a poor relation?

The tongue of Mendele
Sholem Aleichem's language
and also the new crown
of my Shakespeare.
Come here my loyal Fool
protect me with your smile --
my Word, my crown together with the
world
once again - I lose

BAY DEM DENKMOL FUN MIKHOELS

Dayn shtoltser, opgehakter kop
mir dakht: zikh, plutsem gro vert
er heybt di brem di bronzene
farkhidisht:
--gekumen zayt ir haynt
mir optsugebn kovèd
un lozt nit tsu tsu mir
mayn mame-loshn yidish?

do zenen fraynt,
say eygene, say fremde
un efsher umfraynt
zenen oykh gekumen . . .
tsi shteyt khotsh hinter zey
farshemt un shtil -
mayn loshn
vi an oreminke mume?

Di shprakh fun Mendeleh,
di shprakh Sholem Aleykhiems
un oykh di naye kroyn
fun mayn Shekspirn,
aher mayn trayer lets,
bahit mikh mit dayn shmeykhl --
mayn vort, mayn kroyn tsuzamen mit der
velt
Oyf s'nay farlèn fèh

Or perhaps the Word itself
is trying to avoid
this "so called"
vicinity
since like a black
finger in warning
rising from this spot
is the tall crematorium chimney?

But no!
this truth is clear -
my word is fortified against
such fears:
through pain and blood
through Hitler's crematoria
Yiddish did not lose one
single syllable

So where, I now ask,
is my language,
my heart, my breath
the roof
above my severed
head of
bronze?

Tsi efsher vil gor oysmaydn
aleyn dos vort
di dozike, mishteyns gezogt,
mikoymes
vayl s'vornt,
vi a shvartser finger
fun ot dem ort -
der langer krematorium-koymen?

Nor neyn!
di kloze vor iz -
fun shreck azolkhe iz mayn vort
bavornt!
durkh payn un blut,
durkh Hitler's krematories
Keyn zilb keyn eyntsikn
hot yidish nit farlorn!

To vu zhe freg ikh
iz mayn shprakh,
mayn harts, mayn otem
un mayn dakh
iber dem kop
dem brondzenem
dem opgehaktn?

TEN YEARS LATER

With the years, I have become a more
frequent companion of funerals. I'm
now more often a sad guest at precious
graves. Also on my way today I stop-
ped at your memorial, my teacher, my
mentor.

Your severed head
was snow-crested . . .
and I swear I did not feel
the flaming frost. Since eye-to-eye
with you alone have I remained
in this huge, harsh world .
and yet -
today I listened less
to your wise verses
did not unload my bitter heart
nor did I argue my complaint
nor did I argue my complaint
as I usually do . . .

With my palm I brushed aside the snow,
and freed from ice the plaque
at the foot of your tombstone, made
smooth the path
to it, fixed the artificial gravesite
flowers

MIT TSEN YOR SHPETER

Kh'ver mit di yorn ofter a bagleyter
fun levayes: Kh'bin ofter shoy'n a
troyeriker gast bay kvorin tayere:
Oykh untervegns, haynt bazukht hob
ikh dayn denkmol, moyre-derekh may-
ner.

Dayn opgehakter kop
z'geven farshneyt
un kh'shver, az nit geshpirt hob'ikh;
dem'flakerdikn frost. VayI oyg-oyf-oyg
mit dir aleyn farblibn kh'bin
in ot der groyser harbeyvelt
un dokh -
haynt hob ikh veyniker zikh ayngheert
in dayne kluge psukim
farhert hob ikh dayn foterlekh'n muser,
Kh'hob haynt nit oysgeret mayn biter
harts
Nit oysgetaynet hob ikh zikh,
vi kh'tu geveyntlekh

Kh'hob mit der dlonye opgeshart dem
shney
bafrayt fun ayz dem tovl un dem shteyn
tsufusns der matseyve, oysgeglaykht
dos shtegele
tsu ir, farrikht di kvorim-blumen
kinstlekh

and strewed fresh boughs of evergreen
at the memorial . . .

But suddenly in derision
your brow was raised
your living glance was scalding:
so - you're happy Joey
though no one's there to see, yet
how industrious you are
how loyal to my memory
how wonderful!
Is that really why you come to me
to catch sidelong glimpses of yourself?

Your laughter rang on and on
as I took leave of you ashamed . . .
Yet somewhere a spark of joy still
smoldered:
your derision lives in me!

un frische khvoye tsvayglekh oysgeshpreyt
baym denkmol . . .

Nor plutsem hot mit khoyzik zikh
a heyb geton dayn brem
un s'hot a bri geton dayn lebediker blik:
"azoy, azoy, du bist tsufridn yoysefke --
khotsh keyner zet es nit un dokh -
vi tikhtik bistu
un vi tray mayn ondenk . . .
vi herlekh!

derfar take bistu tsu mir gekumen,
kidey a blik ton fun der vayt oyf zikh
aleyn?

Un lang nokh hot geklungen dayn gelekhter
ven kh'bin farsheht avek fin dir . . .
nor ergets hot a funk getliet:
s'lebt in mir dayn khoyzik

AUGUST 12, 1952

On this very day, on this very day
we tightly lock up our lament and our
pain

pain in our hearts, lament twixt our
teeth

Bergelson, Kvitko, Hofstheyn & Markish

It was deep in the night when they
breathed their last breath
no consolation was brought before
death
the only anointing radiance then,
was the murderous salvo of shots aimed
at them.

On this very day, on this very day
I lift my bloodied song, to be carried
away

my song as a gravestone, a candle my
heart,

yet I am unable to fulfill my part.

For where shall I place them,

when no place exists?

Bergelson, Kvitko, Hofstheyn & Markish.

12 OYGUST 1952

In dem dozikn tog, in dem dozikn tog,
farshparn mir shtarker di payn un di
klog

di payn - inem hartsn, di klog - tsvishn
tseyen -

bergelson, markish, kvitko, un hofshtein.

Zey zaynen gefaln in' mit fun der
nakht

un s'hot keyner keyn treyst farn toyt,
zey gebrakht . . .

un di eyntsike shayn, velkhe hot zey
gezalbt

iz geven dan - der blits fun dem
rotskhishn zalp . . .

In dem dozikn tog, in dem dozikn tog
mayn tseblutikt gezang heyb ikh oyf un
ikh' trog

mayn lid - a matseyve, mayn harts, vi a
likht,

nor ikh vel shoyn, vayzt oys, nit derfiln
mayn flikht -

s'iz nito vu tsu shteln

kayn likht un kayn shteyn . . .

bergelson, markish, kvitko un hofshtein.

BROKEN RHYTHMS

Trudging thousands of hard
miles of land,
came before I took
my pen in hand.

Were this but true of the despoilers
what a sport
tearing word for word out
from my heart!

And at that still --
singing to the beat
and at that still --
putting up a front
so no one should
know how much I hurt,
after all
you choose to call
me, a "free-flying bird."

With my bare feet, barbed wire
was crossed --
a thousand miles in rags and tatters
through the frost,
only then could I take pen
in hand
giving my word

GEBROKHENE RITMEN

Toyznt shvere mayln
durkhgeshpant
biz genumen kh'ob
di pen in hant.

Aza yor oyf nit farginer,
sara sport -
raysn fun dem hartsn
vort nokh vort!

Un derbay nokh
zingendik tsum takt
un derbay nokh --
Knaypndik a bak,
az nit visn
keyner zol mayn vey
Kh:'bin dokh fort,
vi zogt ir dort,
a "frayer solovey"

Borves iber shtekhdrot
zikh-geløzt
toyznt mayln krue-blue
durkh a frost
biz di pen in hant arayn
zi kumt
biz dos vort mayns

reason to expand
so like a babe
radiant in wonder,
so like a bird,
wounded, earthward plunging.

plutsem zikh tsebrunt
vi a zoygling,
shtralndik far vunder
vi a foygl,
falndik farvundikt

Were this but true of the despoilers
what a craft.
So I break my rhythms
and I laugh ---

Aza yor oyf nit farginer
sara fakh.
brekh ikh mayne ritmen
un ikh lakh ---

I have eaten not too long ago
I've had a drink, thank you ever so ---
but a glass of tea
hot and strong in measure -
with great pleasure

Opgegesn hob ikh gor nit lang
oysgetruhkn hob ikh oykh - a dank!
nor zet ir, a gloz tey,
a shtarke un a heyse -
mekheteyse

Since I am one who has already eaten
And I have had to drink
I have done my sitting
and I have had to sink
And I have risen as a sprout
with no seed sown, and no soil tilled
so pour me that small glass of tea
for I have not been killed!

Vayl kh'bin shoyn a gegesener
un kh'bin shoyn a getrunkeney,
un kh'bin shoyn a gezesener
un kh'bin shoyn a gezunkener
un kh'bin an oyfgeganger:
vu kh'bin nit keyn farzeyter -
iz gist mir on a glezl tey,
vayl kh'bin nit keyn geteyter!

*gezesener = one who has sat

also = served time in prison, etc.

FROM THE FAR REACHES

From such frightfully long
distances they run together
coming to a rest.

north,

 south,

 east,

 west . . .

Already there is no more room
to stretch out
my blessing arm ---
hard edge on edge
as wall against wall
in the middle - I
as in a dungeon.

How right in its might-
is my heart's longing.
to fence it in
from the vast reaches of this land,
here they came to rest
north,
south,
east,
west!

FUN ALDE VAYT

Fun azelkhe moyredike,
shrekendike shtrekes
zaynen zikh tsenoyfgelofn
mizrakh

 mayrev

 tsofn

 dorem

Un keyn plats nishto shoyn
oystsushtrekn
mayn bentshdikn orem ---
rand antkegn rand
vi vant antkegn vant
ikh - in mit,
vi zayn volt ikh in kartser

o vi mekhtik- un gerekhtik
iz di beynkshaft fun mayn hartsn
tsoymen zi-
fun gor dem rakhvisdikn land
zaynen zikh tsenoyfgelofn
mizrakh,
mayrev,
dorem,
tsofn!

MAY YOU NEVER HAVE TO . . .

ZOL MEN NISHT GEPRUVT VERN

May you never have to go through
all the things that men get used to:
swallow salt, without a drop of water,
food - without salt
water - to drown in, over your throat.. .

to days - without sunshine,
to nights - without stars
and to the prison cage
with locks and bars.

Beginning, when . . . (I couldn't guess)
I've been put through every test.

And thank God
and I've gotten used to nothing,
and I've not been weaned from wrath.

Zol men nisht gepruvt vern,
tsu vos me kon gevoynt vern:
tsu gezaltsns, on a tropn vasser
tsu shpayz - on zalts
un tsu vaser - ibern haldz

tsu teg - on zumen-shayn
tsu nekht - on shtern
un tsu der turme-shtayg
mit shleser shverę.

Un ikh fun veysokh ven
bin shoynt mit alts gepruvt geven

Un dankn got:
tsu gornisht nit gevoynt gevorn,
fun tsorn nit antvoynt gevorn.

MOTHER TONGUE

My Yiddish mother-tongue
my maternal language
the flame of your idiom
it seems, will be extinguished.

How free were those times when,
your script was poured in lead
the lead was taken then
to shoot your poets dead.

In quiet, without fuss
your holy books they burned.
The problem of the ash
was cared for by the wind.

Yet the words, forbidden us -
are on the tips of tongues
sayings slyly wink at us
from places here and yon.

Striking through the fog,
suddenly as lightning
a quick incisive joke:
Pharoah, Haman deriding.

MAME - LOSHN

Mayn muterlokhe shprakh,
mayn yidish mame-loshn
dayn flemele, mir dakht,
ot vert es oysgeloshn ---

Ot hot men franku n fray
dayn shrift oyf blay gegosn,
dernokh dem mitn blay --
di dikhter oysgeshosn.

Ot hot men shtil on rash,
farbrent shoyn dayne sform.
Un s'hobn zeyer ash
di vintn shoyn bavornt.

Nor sep pikt zikh oyf der tsung
dos loshn dos farverte,
s'tut mamzerish a vunk
fun ergets vu a vertl.

S'tut plutsem, vi a blits
fun tsvishn shvere khmares
a shnayndiker vits
Oyf hamenen, oyf paren.

The melody takes hold
starts tugging at the soul
and from afar they flood
and from strange parts they call.

The living and the dead
the young and old as well
nor can there be that dread
to stop this movement's swell.

As to a well they come
with parched mouths, cinder-dry,
a Jew and a Maran
convert and proselite.

The explosive cry is heard.
They come from everywhere,
drawn to the heartfelt word
bathed in freshest air.

And the world in wonder
rings and laughs in song
for my Yiddish language
my pithy mother-tongue.

A nign tut a nem,
a tsup far der nishome
un sfleytsn fun der fremd,
fun ale zaytn shtromen -

Say lebedik, say toyt
say yunge un say alte,-
nito nokh yene noit,
vos kon dem gang farhalten.

Di mayler - trukn-brand,
vi tsur a kval zey kumen
a yid un a maran
a ger un a meshumed.

Me kumt ahin vu s'ruft
mit oyfrays ongelodn,
dos heyse vort, in luft
in frisher oysgebodn.

Un sklingt un zingt un lakht
der gantser velt oyf khidish,
mayn yoderdiker shprakh,
mayn mame-loshn yidish.

BOYS AND GIRLS AT THE MOSCOW SYNAGOGUE

They come here
together,
like pups, blindly seeking
their mother's breast . . .

My children, at loggerheads,
they know no letter of the prayer-book
no Yiddish word,
So what has brought them all together
to this spot?
Here, where the columns
bow before the women's cries
Where old men flicker
in the quiet corners
hcarse
from intensive prayer,
here - to the fantasized
through fasting -
stream of milk and honey
are they here by way of
quantum theory-electronics?

Were they driven here
by the cutting winter,
Flaying off the modern garb
exposing
bone and blood?

YINGLEKH UN MEYDLEKH BAY DER MOSKVER SHUL

Zey kumen zikh aher
tsuzamen,
vi hintlekh, velkhe zukhn blind
di brust fun zeyer mamem . . .

Kinder mayne, kider-vider-
zey veysn dokh keyn os in sider,
keyn yidish vort,
tsu vos hot zey tsunoyfgebrakht
tsu ot dem ort?
aher, vu di kolones
beygn zikh far vaybershe geveynen,
vu s'flemlen zkeynim
in di vinklen shtile,
heyrerikelfun fartifter tfile
aher - tsum oysgetroytn
in taneysim
taykh fun milkh un honik -
tsi kumen zey durkh formules
fun kvant un elektronik?

Tsi s'hot faryogt aher
der shnayndiker vinter,
vos bizn beyn un bizn blut
malbushimlekh moderne
shint er?

Or perhaps it is the old
stubborn Jewish spite which
is awakened when the cold-sworded evil
eye
threatens our life?

From faculties, from factories
and from the estranged home
like underwater-boats
secretly
they surface
at the worn out
ancient temple steps
the proud blossoming heads
of my children.

tsi efsher gor - der alter
yidisher lehakhes,
ven s'beyze oyg - a shverd a
kalte,
bay undzer otem - vakh iz?

Fun facultetn, fun zavodn,
un fun der opgefremter heym,
vi untervaser-shiflekh
in geheym -
zey toykhn plutsem oyf
bay oysgetrotene,
bay grayze templtrep,
di shtoltse bliendike kep
fun mayne kinder.

LET GO

How truly human, I believe,
were you to bless me, free to leave
appreciating the fair worth
of my blood for our earth

In the night, there's my cold sweat,
your light gone out, your truth near
death

recognize how great my cost
to kindle flame in snow-drift frost

Your fiercesome frosts, while pressing
hard

squeezed out each drop without regard
my spring, my summertime as well
until I came upon myself.

It would be human, genuine
to bless me and let me begin.
But neither truth nor humaness
appear among your many guests

So you keep me, hand in chain.
No links loose to ease the strain
by your embrace enveloped tightly
as though, at once--you're fond of me

Let go -

Throw stones, and curse my name
that wouldn't be quite as profane.

LOZ MIKH

S'volt gevezn meyn ikh mentshlekhn
zolst in veg arayn mikh bentshn ---
s'iz nishkoshe .epes vert
oykh mayn blut far undzer erd,

In di nekht - mayn kalter shveys
vayl dayn emes lesht zikh
oys ---

s'kost nishkoshe mikh gants tayer
oyfn shnay-zavay dos fayer

S'hobn dayne beyze frest
biz a tropn oysgeprest
say mayn friling, say mayn zumer
biz tsu zikh bin ikh gekumen,

S'volt gevezn ekht un mentshlekhn
zolst in veg arayn mikh bentshn
ober mentshlekhn kayt un ekhtkeyt
bay dayn shtub vayzt oys nit nekhtikt

Haltstu oyf der keyt mayn hant
Lozt nit op fun zikh keyn shpan
host mikh fest arumgenumen
host mikh plutsim dib bakumen

Loz mikh

Varf ~~nokh~~ nokh a shteyn
s'volt nit zayn azoy gemeyn.

OF VARIOUS YEARS

FUN FARSHEYDENE YORN

The cold and the blind and the deaf
violence

rends us apart like a cleaver and
shredder

yet to its harshness I give no
obeisance,

nor shall I sacrifice one single letter.

I'm sick of it all, ad nauseum
by purposeless struggles with my friend
the lout.

The gift of my light was extinguished
by him
he needed the darkness to wipe my roots
out.

I'd venture out on a calm quiet eve --
was it your call, or my mind's make
believe?

Then I'd go out in a day of ferment --
have you, from afar heard my plaint and
lament?

As people and towns whirl by rushing my
mind,

Di kalte, di blinde, di toybe
ritsikhe,

zi brokt vi dos hakmeser on a
farvos,

nor kh'vel oyf di kni far ir tempkayt
nit krikhn,

nit makriv zayn vel ikh keyn eyntsikn os.

s'iz nimes gevorn mir biz tsu khaloshes
der tsveklozer shtrayt mitn khaverl-
kham

dos likht, mayn geshank hot er zelbst
oysgelosht,

kidey in der fintster farshnaydn mayn
shtam . . .

kum ikh aroys in a shtiln farnakht -
tsi hostu gerufn, tsi s'hot zikh
gedakht?

gey ikh aroys in a royshikn tog -
tsi hostu derhert fun der vaytns mayn
klog?

Se shvindlen di shtet un se vimlen di
layt

time's razor-sharp gears relentlessly
grind.

un s'dreyt ire tseynteder sharfe di
tsayt

The millstones grind on, knives continue
to flay
day after night, night after day

Di milshteyner moln, dos hakmeser
brokt -
a tog nokh a nakht um a nakht nokh a
tog! . . .

You from afar, at least make your voice
heard, and
let yourself feel with me, shoulder the
burden

Nor loz khotsh derhern fun vaytns-dayn
kol,
dershiprn mikh loz oyf di akslen dayn
ol,

I will prevail, that truth is my own
I'm stronger than iron, I'm harder than
stone,
I outfreeze the frosts, the flames I
outblast
splitting through rocks, I sprout like
the grass.

Un blaybn kh'vel blaybn, dos veys ikh
aleyn,
kh'bin shtarker fun ayzn kh'bin harter
furn shteyn,
kh'bren iber dem flam um frir iber dem
frost
un - shprotsndik, felzn ikh shpalt, vi
dos groz.

Oh my faithful mother, from afar
the blessings of your hands reach out to
me -

Mayn gute traye muter fun der vayt
shpir ikh dayne bentshndike hent,

I won't be crushed, however hard times
are,

tsemoln vet mikh nit, ikh veys, di harte
tsayt

I can't be swallowed up by anomie.

un mikh farshlingn - iz nishto aza min
fremd.

My life, like the dove, trembles when
the hawk,

first drops its shadow on the prey it
stalks.

My life, like a mailed fist, smashes
asunder

the boulders, and uproots the thorns
from under

the earth on my way to you
my mother.

Mayn lebn is - a tsaplendike toyb,

ven s'falt der shotn fun a shparber oyf
zayn royb

Mayn lebn iz - a shver geshmidter
foyst,

er breklt valger-shteyner, derner -
vortslt oys

vos vaksn oyfn veg tsu dir,
mayn muter:

RECKONING

And just in case -
you do not cease demanding
and just in case.-
you do not cease reminding
lest I forget:
I breathe your air,
I eat your bread! . . .

Your reproaches hound
my every step.
enough!
We're quit
nothing's left
I've paid for everything all told
and not at all with "Jewish Gold,"
and not at all by "craftiness,"
which constricts your own "largess."
I have paid for every bite
rending pieces of my hide.
Spitting pieces of my lung
for every water-drop I've drunk.
For every breath of air I've had
I felt a sword above my head.

If you must know - your very might -
my sweat and marrow fortified.

KHEZHBIN

Un tomer vos -
du herst nit oyf tsu monen,
un tomer vos -
du herst nit oyf dermonen,
az ikh farges;
dayn luft ikh otem,
dayn broit ikh es! . . .

vi hint farloifn ot di taynes
mayne trit.
genug!
mir zenen kvit
far alts,
far alts hob ikh batsolt
un davke nit mit "yidish gold,"
un davke nit mit "khitre geng,"
vos makhn dir dayn breytkeyt eng.
Getsolt hob ikh far yedn bisn -
fun zikh aleyn di hoyt gerisn,
Geshpign hob ikh shtiker lung
far yeder mindstn vaserشلung,
Far yeder otem luft ikh hob
a shverd geshpirt iber mayn kop.

Un vilstu visn - iz dayn makht
gefestikt oyf mayn shveys un markh,

My blood as well, if you must know,
with salty groundwater would flow,
bearing life up through the roots
flavoring your budding shoots . . .

But I, you see, have no complaint:
the land is yours, it's your terrain
and all, save me, that on the ground
belongs to you and you alone
and me - let go! don't hold me back.
we are quit!

Un oykh mayn blut, oyb visn vilst,
mit gruntvaser tsuzamen flist,
mit khayes durkh di vortslen fleytst,
az oyfgeyn zol geshmak dayn veyts . . .

Nor ikh, zestu, ikh hob keyn tayne:
s'iz dayns dos land, di erd iz dayne
un alts khuts mir, oyf ot der erd,
tsu dir aleyn, tsu dir gehert,
un mikh - loz op! farhalt mikh nit
mir zenen kvit!